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SUBJECT: GREECE ELECTS NEW ARCHBISHOP -- SAME LINE, LOWER  
KEY

REF: ATHENS 124

11. (U) Ieronymos, Archbishop of Thebes, was elected February 7, 2008 as the new Archbishop of Athens and all Greece by the Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church. Signaling election of a new Archbishop with illumination of the exterior lights of Athens' Metropolitan Cathedral -- a new procedure ostensibly implemented to be reminiscent of Vatican protocol -- television and radio interrupted regular programs to announce the news. The election comes 11 days after the death of Archbishop Christodoulos who presided over the church for ten years (reftel) and is seen as a personal vindication for Ieronymos who lost to Christodoulos ten years ago in the wake of false allegations of Ieronymos' involvement in a financial scandal. The second-ballot vote to elect Ieronymos this time came much earlier than most observers expected, likely indicating wide agreement among the bishops of the Holy Synod. The final tally of 45 votes for Ieronymos (out of 74) gave the new Archbishop a comfortable margin with 7 more votes than needed to achieve a majority plus one. Most observers saw only two candidates as likely to succeed Christodoulos: Efsthathios of Sparta and Ieronymos of Thebes, with Efsthathios seen as the more likely of the two. Efsthathios' public comments in the lead-up to the election that he would "cleanse" the Church, however, apparently caused some bishops to fear renewed turmoil (reminiscent of the 2005 financial scandal) and to withdraw their support.

12. (U) Age 70, Ieronymos has been a priest for more than forty years, having been ordained in 1967. He has been the Archbishop of Thebes since his election in 1981. Known to friends as Fr. Mozart, due to his love of classical music, Archbishop Ieronymos is respected as a humble and learned man. During Christodoulos' illness, Ieronymos urged unity of all of the Orthodox faithful and was often portrayed in the media as the voice of reason within the Church leadership. Because many attributed the false allegations made against him ten years ago to supporters of Christodoulos, there was some bitterness between the two -- especially during Christodoulos' early years when Ieronymos criticized Christodoulos' heavy-handed use of the bully pulpit. Likewise, when Christodoulos engaged in a public fight with Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, Ieronymos remained a supporter of the Patriarch.

13. (SBU) Comment: Although we expect Ieronymos to adopt reform efforts within the Church of Greece, we do not expect him to be as zealous a public advocate as was the fiercely political Christodoulos, nor do we anticipate him taking the Church in any radically different or new direction. While he likely will not shy away from taking traditional positions on social matters, he is unlikely to engage in the broad public sweeps on all matters foreign and domestic that were common under Christodoulos. Moreover, Ieronymos seems well attuned to the wish of the majority of the Holy Synod (the ruling

body of the Orthodox Church of Greece) for an archbishop who favors a collective or synodal approach to ecclesiastical administration (which many accused Christodoulos of having abandoned), and one who will heal recent rifts with the Patriarch of Constantinople. During his time as Metropolitan of Thebes, Ieronymos maintained extensive secular contacts and appeared as comfortable as an interlocutor with political and business leaders as with religious figures. End comment.  
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